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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SHANGHAI 000281

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TAGS: CH ECON IR PGOV SOCI

SUBJECT: NANJING ACADEMIC: DESPITE SLOWER REFORM, CHINESE DEMOCRACY  
STILL TOPIC OF DEBATE

REF: 1) 08 SHANGHAI 352; B) SHANGHAI 50

CLASSIFIED BY: Simon Schuchat, Deputy Principal Officer, U.S.  
Consulate General, Shanghai, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: As demonstrated by recent events, Iran, like China, currently lacks the political culture needed to support a democratic political system, according to a well-known Nanjing University academic. Discussion on democracy continues among intellectuals and the Chinese public, even though corruption scandals and the economic slowdown have impeded experiments in political reform, and provincial leaders who had been leaning toward reform have become more cautious. Nevertheless, China's leaders have become much more attentive and responsive to popular opinion, which they monitor closely. End summary.

Iran, China, and Democracy: "Neutral" Political Culture Needed for Democracy

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¶2. (SBU) The current unrest in Iran following its presidential election reveals that that country has adopted the forms of democracy but not its essence, observed Nanjing University Philosophy Professor Gu Su (refs) in a June 19 meeting with Shanghai's Deputy Principal Officer (DPO). Gu said Chinese media coverage of events in Iran had been fairly comprehensive and had included commentary by Chinese experts analyzing the situation. Although China has good relations with Iran, Chinese leaders are "reasonable" and do not encourage Iran's development of its nuclear program. China's economic cooperation with Iran, Gu noted, centers on oil and is not as close as with major regional economies like Thailand.

¶3. (C) Gu acknowledged substantial discussion is taking place about the nature of democracy among Chinese intellectuals, including on Chinese internet sites. His own view is that democracy requires competitive elections, rule of law, and a political culture where politicians adhere to a "neutral moral standard" that avoids zero-sum conflict. He pointed to Taiwan as an example of political competition run amok but expressed confidence that a neutral standard is emerging. Gu indicated his students also felt the need for China to develop its political culture as a prerequisite to greater democracy. Returning to the example of Iran, he likened the Iranian regime's approach to that of China during the Cultural Revolution where propaganda and repression were the main tools of political control. Many Chinese have a similar opinion of

North Korea, Gu added, which he said was characterized by some in China as a "hooligan government" (liumang zhengfu).

Corruption, Econ Slowdown Retard Political Reform

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¶4. (C) The big question for advocates of political reform in China, Gu stressed, is how to advance political change without damaging the economy. This issue dominated a recent meeting of political scientists in Beijing he had attended. One experimental idea currently in circulation is establishing a separation of powers within the Communist Party among the Secretariat, the plenary Party committee, and the discipline inspection commission functioning as the CCP's executive, legislative, and judicial branches, respectively, with independent but equal authority. In Gu's assessment, the prosperous provinces of East and South China are ripe for potential experimentation with new political structures. (In contrast, Gu noted North China is the center of neo-authoritarian, "New Left" views.)

¶5. (C) Nevertheless, regional leaders have encountered obstacles in pursuing political reform. According to Gu, a proposal to experiment with political reform in Shenzhen had been scrapped as a result of the corruption scandal that had led to the removal of the Shenzhen mayor and his replacement by Suzhou Party Secretary Wang Rong. This case along with the global economic slowdown and resistance from local interests had put a damper on political reform initiatives by Guangdong Party Secretary Wang Yang. In addition, Shanghai Party Secretary Yu Zhengsheng, Gu observed, is no longer as brave in pursuing reform initiatives as he had been during his previous tenure in Hubei Province, probably as a result of Shanghai's higher

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profile and greater institutional complexity.

Authorities Strengthen Response to Mass Opinion

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¶6. (C) The central leadership, however, has become substantially more sensitive to public opinion, Gu stressed. The authorities closely monitor the Internet for signs of incidents or issues likely to provoke demonstrations or mass action and have a leading group in place in Beijing to establish quickly the government's policy and reaction. Gu cited the example of the recent acquittal of Deng Yujiao, a waitress who killed a township cadre who attempted to sexually assault her, as well as the official reaction to the mass unrest in Guizhou's Weng'an County as indicative of the authorities' new responsiveness to mass opinion.

Pres. Obama Popular but Still Unnerves Leadership

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¶7. (C) President Obama continues to be very popular with most Chinese, who view him as a skill politician yet very good with people, Gu said. China's leaders, however, remain less comfortable with the Democratic Party. In the eyes of China's leadership, the Republicans have tended to be "more serious" and "will keep their promises." That said, Gu felt, the Obama Administration is "unlikely to do anything to anger" the Chinese leadership.

Comment

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¶8. (C) Gu is a long-time Nanjing contact and an avowed "liberal" who writes a popular blog. Although the extent of his influence on Chinese policymakers is unclear, he frequents intellectual circles in Shanghai and Nanjing where options for political reform are discussed. His remarks indicate that while China's leaders -- even at the local level -- are probably not willing to venture much beyond the current relatively low level of political experimentation, there are plenty of ideas in

circulation should they change their minds.  
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